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A THEORY AND A FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSE

By E. C. CLINE

THE foreign language work in our system (Richmond, Indiana) really begins in the last semester of the seventh grade in the Junior High School, although the actual study of a particular language does not begin until the eighth grade is reached. In the last half of the seventh year we offer a general language course which all students are required to take. Our manual says of it: "This course is designed to give to the student a general, elementary idea of language as such through the medium of comparison between English and foreign languages, chiefly Latin. It . . . will lead equally well to future work either in English or in foreign languages. The course will be conducted largely as a laboratory course with materials furnished by the teacher and the pupils. The aims of the course, specifically, are: (1) a study of the origin, growth, and influence of language in human history—how man began to use language, how he improved this tool and how this wonderful tool in turn has proved the greatest of all human factors in elevating man to his present position in the world; (2) a study of words, their history, the meaning of their prefixes and suffixes, etc., and of the use of the dictionary; (3) the development of a feeling for the significance of phrase, clause and sentence in the expression of thought; (4) a study of such fundamentals of grammar and syntax as will furnish valuable tools for future language work, whether English or foreign, not by formal study but by experiment; (5) incidentally, to discover such students as have capacity for advanced language study and to encourage them to continue this preparatory course by the study of a foreign language."

This work, we feel, has the same justification and accomplishes much the same purpose as the present General Mathematics and General Science courses. There is certainly need of a course which will lead to an appreciation of language as a human institution, of words—those interesting symbols of language—and of the fundamental relationship of words to each other in the expression of thought. By using some of the material and method of foreign

language study we believe we are succeeding much better than any similar work will succeed through the study of the too-familiar vernacular only. Besides the purely informational value of the course, it will also introduce the student to new types of language study and new methods, will open up new vistas of interest, and furnish him with the tools to pursue this interest in future language work.

In addition to the educational aims stated above, the Foreign Language Department expects that students who have had the course will be much better prepared to do work in foreign languages and will accomplish more, and that many students with special language ability who now remain outside of foreign language work by reason of some misunderstanding will be attracted into the work, while others who should not elect such work will be discovered and so advised.

As stated, the present General Language Course is designed for one semester only. The present plan, however, envisages the expansion of the course into a course of one year. Each semester will still have definite aims and results and will be a complete unit in itself for which credit will be given, even though the work is not continued. The second semester will be elective. As the work is expanded, the second semester will continue the laboratory study of language referred to above, with this difference, however, that the foreign language used as a basis of the work (which in the present course is chiefly Latin) will be Latin, French or Spanish, depending on the language that the student elects to pursue at the end of the first semester of the course. In other words, this will take the place and largely serve the purpose of what is now the first semester of work in Latin or French or Spanish, and will be handled by the special teachers of these subjects. By the end of the second semester of this course the student will be actually beginning the study of Latin, French, or Spanish, as such. The beginning texts of those languages are so chosen that the work of the general course will lead directly into these texts and will cover the first part of the text book work. This work, as given in the General Language Course, however, will be specific study of the elementary principles of sound production and of only such language principles as have been previously studied in a general way, so that the student, if he cares

to, may drop the course at the end of the second semester with a real unit of work completed and without having begun something that is of value only on condition that future work be done in the foreign language.

Part—a large part—of the value of foreign language study, in our opinion, is that it is specialized language study, and the principles learned should function equally well in the use of the native and of the foreign language. Therefore, the English and the Foreign Language Departments are working in close cooperation, so that there may be no conflict or duplication, and we shall feel that our General Language Course is successful only if the results are noticeably beneficial in future English work also.

We believe that this arrangement will provide a solution of a problem that will soon confront foreign language teachers, where it is not already pending: that of removing the general condition of requiring two years of foreign language work before any credit is given. It seems much better strategy to make the step voluntarily as an avowed attempt to keep pace with modern curriculum building than to accept it later, claiming that it is a backward step forced upon us. To say that we have made a backward step even under compulsion makes it only more difficult to “sell” our course. Those who obstinately held out for a four years’ requirement of Latin, on the plea that four years were required to produce good results in Latin, found themselves in an awkward position when they had to accept and justify shorter courses. In the course as proposed, the pupil must take the first semester of the General Language Course; he may then drop the work or he may elect the second semester and drop the work at the end of that semester. By that time the student will have had the benefit of language study of the type done in foreign language work, and both pupil and advisor will know whether the pupil should continue foreign language study.

We feel also that this provision is better in other respects than the arrangement in which two years of work are required just at the beginning of the course before any credit is given—particularly in the case of those courses in which the grammar work consumes most of the two years in order to give that “good foundation.” In the first place, many do not, and in the future more will not, sign up for two years of work before they can know

whether they are fitted for it. Besides, after they have signed up, there are a certain number of unwilling prisoners in the course who must stay whether they are being benefited or not in order not to lose credit for work already done. This, no doubt, keeps up the number in the department, but has no other good result. Our faith in the course above is such that we believe the interest in language study will be so increased that the total enrollment will be greater without any artificial means of keeping pupils in the department.

Where credit is given for one year of work, it does not seem that a grammar or preparatory course planned purely for future work is particularly valuable for students who have only one year for language study. In fact, such a course does not seem the most desirable even for those who have two years for foreign language study.

After the first year of language work (only one semester of which has dealt with French), the work in French will continue in the study of French grammar, in which the aim will be, not to cram the student with many irregular verb forms, the fine *nuances* of the subjunctive, the past definite, and the like, but to get thoroughly a few fundamentals—a skeleton of grammar only, so that one may begin to *read* as soon as possible. We believe that in French, as in English, a mastery of the minutiae of grammar is not necessary in order to be able to read, and to read intelligently, ordinary prose. Since we do have less time to teach French than the student can spend learning to read English, we must, we agree, give him some special work—and there is benefit from the study of grammar; but we need not make a grammarian of the student. We do not label our method of procedure in this work of preparation; it is neither direct nor natural nor unnatural; we are as informal as possible and get most of the grammar inductively from the reading of French, and French is the language used in the class room except when the vernacular is necessary to make a point clear. We have a beginning reader that is really a *beginning* book that parallels our progress in grammar work; this we begin almost at the beginning of the course. In about three semesters, then, (in the Senior High School, two) we get the fundamentals of grammar and at the same time launch the student into the reading of French.

This reading we continue intensively throughout the rest of the course. We are frankly committed to the idea that a secondary school can develop in students only a moderate command of written and spoken French, but that the ability to read easily and with pleasure modern French can be developed if that aim is kept continually in view from the beginning; and that the ability to read is to the student more valuable than the ability to speak and to write, both from a practical and from a cultural standpoint. Now, we are not unmindful of the linguistic value of grammar study, of oral and written work in a foreign language, or even of translation. We realize the value of aural and visual experience, of oral and motor expression, in language learning. We believe that practically all class conversation should be in French and that in advanced reading classes, if the work is properly graded, much of the time usually given to translation can be devoted to oral work. We believe also that written work should be done. We simply mean that all this should be based on reading texts, and that it should be done with an eye single to the development: (1) of the ability to read; (2) of confidence in that ability; (3) of a desire to read. If we can get a pupil to read French and besides enable him to order a cab in Paris, if he should be the one in a hundred who will have that opportunity, so much the better; but we do not intend to reverse the order of importance. We do not believe in sacrificing the more possible and the more practical for the less possible and the less practical; we do not consider that in so doing we should be either "practical" or "progressive" or "reformed." Nor do we want to spend so much time getting a "good foundation" that little time is left to use the foundation, or when most of the students must discontinue the work as soon as the foundation is finished. The sooner we get to reading and the more time we have for it, the better.

The order of importance of the aims that we should keep in view in teaching French to American pupils is as follows: ability to read French, ability to write it, ability to understand the spoken language, ability to speak the language. The opportunity of Americans to hear or to speak French is practically negligible, while many can and do read it and carry on foreign correspondence with pleasure and profit. One may follow this program and, if

proper methods are used, enjoy all the technical advantages of foreign language study, develop a sense of the significance of language as such, and still be giving to the course the same importance to each item that it will have in the pupil's life. It is by extensive reading that we can best give to the student the cultural advantage of foreign language study—a knowledge of and an interest in the life, history, literature and civilization of a foreign people. It is through reading that we get most of our information in regard to our own civilization even though continually surrounded by people who speak our language.

In developing this ability to read French the choice of reading material has more often hindered than helped. It seems that the so-called grading of reading material in foreign languages usually means this: we start the pupil with something so difficult that only by laborious "digging" and by much consultation of the lexicon can he cover a few pages; just as soon as he begins to be able to *read* material of that grade, he is put at something else beyond his then reading ability and the grind continues, so that only the hardy survivors—the very brilliant—who stick to the end of the course ever find themselves really *reading*; but worse than that, no one (except, perhaps, the few) ever acquires the *confidence* in his ability to read French, without which he will never read French outside of school. The foreign language teachers have not been the only sinners in this respect, but the teachers of English now realize that the reading of Shakespeare's tragedies or of *Paradise Lost* by beginners does not teach the pupil to read, enlarge his vocabulary, or inspire in him the love of reading. One learns to read by doing *much* reading of material easily read and one *desires* to read only when one can read easily. So we have not tried particularly to grade the reading in the early semesters, but we use easy reading and much of it. We shall not hesitate to read in the second year *several* bits, marked in the catalogues "first year," instead of spending an entire semester on one "second" year text, and we allow an upper class to read the *Voyage de M. Perrichon* even though it can be completed in a few days. Our only requirement is that the language be French and that the content have the flavor of France. By dint of doing much reading, the recurrent words and the common idioms become so familiar by sheer repetition that when the pupil tries to

read new or more difficult material, the reading habits formed, the complete familiarity with much of the context, and especially his *confidence* in his ability to read, carry him over the unfamiliar. And that is how we all read.

If we proceed in this manner, we avoid the necessity of rereading in class what the pupil has already read out of class—procedure which wastes time and kills interest. If the student has really been *reading* the story and understands it, a brief oral discussion can assure the teacher of this and advanced reading can be immediately resumed with discussion in French of difficulties. Those who are worrying about the amount of spoken French used will find that more can be employed in such a course than in the traditional course, and employed with more interest and profit. But it is difficult to get a child to talk in a foreign tongue about something that he does not understand.

While in the beginning courses the reading is simple and deals chiefly with the elementary facts of French life, customs, history, etc., in the latter part of the course the student will read newspapers, magazines, modern novels, history, etc., and will deal more formally and specifically with the various features of French civilization. In such courses, the great names and the great periods will be blocked off by weeks and an outline with references to books will be furnished the pupils at the beginning of the semester. A number of books on various subjects will be provided and no restraint will be put on the pupils as to their choice of reading except that a certain minimum in pages will be demanded and that enough reading must be done on the topics assigned to get the desired information. Notes on the reading on the special topics will be kept in notebooks. Checking of the other work will be done by brief written outlines and by oral quizzes, the teacher dealing with individuals. In other words, the work will proceed much in the manner of a laboratory course, with most of the time in class and out spent in silent reading. Occasional brief talks in French will be given by the instructor on subjects germane to the work of the class. The time spent in reading, writing, listening to French and speaking French will be quite in proportion to the relative importance of these phases of foreign language work in the future life of the student.

Now, somewhere in the third or fourth year, we get hold of the people who expect seriously to continue the study of French throughout the high school course and further. For these people we provide the means of completing the grammar work of which they had a brief outline in the first year. Knowledge of the fact that the subjunctive is sometimes used in a relative clause when the antecedent is qualified by "seul" will not have much vital bearing in the life of the student who can take only one or two years of French—he will have read many of these clauses in his course quite correctly, utterly oblivious of the fact that an interesting grammatical construction was lurking within, and it would have been wasting his time to have consumed it in learning that and similar details. However, the special students who continue French will have time to spend on such things and should know them. The work is blocked off by weeks and each week has its quota of irregular verbs and each period of two weeks its particular phase of grammar; this outline is put in the pupils' hands with references to grammars where the subjects may be studied. No particular grammar is used, but several are on the reference shelves and the students work up their own arrangement of the material in note books. The teacher furnishes from time to time English sentences to be put into French; as the pupil writes these, he cites the grammatical principle involved, inserts it in his note book if it is not already there, and uses the sentences (and succeeding similar ones) as illustrations of the principle. Other illustrations the pupil notes in his reading or he has his attention called to them. A great deal may be done in grammar work in this way and at this point in the course: many of the grammatical principles have become habitual with the pupil from frequent encounters in his reading and the language sense acquired makes them all seem more reasonable and logical.

In conclusion, we believe that such a course is justified for the following reasons:

- 1) The emphasis given each phase of modern language work corresponds to the functional value of each in the lives of the majority of American students.
- 2) The arrangement of the work meets the requirements of modern curriculum building, which demand that each unit (one semester, or, at most, one year) be complete and valuable in itself.

3) All pupils are given a chance at general language training for one semester or two or more as they choose or as their schedules permit. No one must make the choice between either getting no such training or signing up for a two year course at once.

4) Pupils who can take no more than two years of French are not required to take the same intensive grammatical work as pupils who can spend three or more years in the work; they are not compelled to spend most of their time in French at building a colossal foundation which they will not use; those, and only those, who are going to devote enough time to French to justify detailed study of French grammar are given such work.

5) More students who will be benefited will be attracted into the regular foreign language courses and fewer will get into the work who do not belong there.

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